

South Texas Hispanic Farm Labor Communities Oral History Project

Interview with Bill and Susan Martin

Interview conducted by Mark Robbins and Christine Reiser Robbins

Location: Corpus Christi, TX

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Interview Transcription: Notes were taken down by Christine Reiser Robbins while Bill and Susan Martin shared recollections of the Robstown Labor Camp and related memories. Notes have been transcribed from the original longhand notes taken during the interview, and, when appropriate, reorganized for clarity.

Bill Martin and Susan Martin (spouses)

Bill Martin is the son of Willard Martin, who served as camp manager of the Robstown Labor Camp in the 1940s. Bill was born in Robstown in 1945. He does not know exactly when he began to live at the Robstown Labor Camp as a young child, however, he recalls riding the bus one time from the labor camp to school, so he deduces that he must have moved out there during or after the first grade, as there was no kindergarten at the time.

Bill's father, Willard, was camp manager at the Robstown Labor Camp. Bill's father was 6'4", a stout man who had graduated college in 1942. He did not pass the physical for World War II, and Bill thinks it is possible that he got the opportunity for the camp manager position through that. He had managed a camp in Dawson County, near La Mesa. Bill's sister was born there in 1943. Bill's father, Willard, traveled some, including Chicago and at times to Florida. Bill believes that this could have been assisting to organize new labor camps.

The Martin family lived in a manager's house on the labor camp grounds. The manager's house was a two-bedroom, one-bathroom house. There was a ringer-type washer off to the side. They later added another bedroom to the house. The manager's house was facing Flores Street, a vacant lot away from Mainer Road which is an L-shaped, semi-paved road running east to west. There were white, two-bedroom houses along the road, intersecting with Maynor. These were rented houses, for which "everyone paid something." Most were rented by white families, many of whom were renting the houses as temporary residences after World War II and later moved to town after getting settled. Some of the families in the white houses included the Mosleys, Buck/George Austin, and the Smiths. Bill's family lived next door to the Marvin and Yetta Leshin family. These houses were situated on the south side of County Road 44. There may have been a small cotton field in between.

On the north side, by Mainer, were structures for migrant workers and their families. They were barracks-style, with outdoor laundry and outhouses. Up toward the front was a training area, where veterans did auto training. There were drainage or bar ditches surrounding the camp, plus salt cedar trees planted for a wind break. The bar ditches were 1-2 feet deep. They would burn

the grass in it. Bill remembers getting his Converse sneakers (feet) hot when they burned the grass. Beyond the camp boundaries was all farmland, cultivating cotton.

Today [2013], if you are heading south on the north-south street [Flores], you cross a bridge; that is where some of the drainage ditches were located and some are still there. The area where the white two-bedroom houses once stood has a housing authority complex on it today. The senior center today is located where the training facility for veterans was situated.

As camp manager at the Robstown Labor Camp, Willard Martin had two or three employees, including maintenance and carpentry. Bill recalls that Willard had a “real good relationship with the people at the camp” and later in his business. He would extend credit to contractors, etc. Some of the barracks families turned into permanent residents. They worked at Corn Products out by the refinery. Many of them were returning from war. Migrant families and individuals would “come and go.” ...Children mostly followed the crop [too]. They could pick cotton in west Texas until December in some cases.

Bill remembers playing with the children who lived in the white, 2-bedroom rentals. He does not recall playing with the children from the migrant barracks.

Bill does not recall African Americans living at the camp. There may have been a few African Americans in the field. Bill recalls Robstown being “kind of segregated back then. Black folks lived east of 5th Street.” The community was also segregated within school classes. There was an “Anglo class with some brighter Hispanics.” That circumstance “gradually changed.” By the time Bill was in high school there was no more segregation. In 1961, Susan Martin and Mike Elliff built a bonfire for the Robstown High School bonfire, one of the “duties” of the freshmen. Susan remembers going out to the Labor Camp on a caliche road to pick up Mike.

Bill’s mother was involved in local education. She taught “high first grade.” It was a second year of first grade for Spanish speakers. She taught at Bullard School, Robstown Elementary, and Lotspeich. Although she taught Spanish speakers, she herself didn’t speak Spanish. She made three meals a day for their family, and would come home at lunch. She had a lot of really good friends that she taught with. They would play bridge in the evenings, particularly as couples. They did a lot of storytelling about growing up in small towns. Susan Martin later substitute taught at Bullard, after she and Bill married in 1970. She recalls that children would come from Michigan, etc. and go to school.

Regarding the larger town of Robstown, Susan Martin recounted that she was not allowed to go to town on Saturdays because it was so busy with people/pickers. On Avenue A, behind Main Street, a person once counted 100 honky tonk bars. Cotton’s (a well-known barbeque establishment at the time of the interview) was there (in 1947?); it started as an establishment selling beer and then added a few foods. Over time, it slowly flipped and became known as a barbeque restaurant. Susan Martin’s grandfather owned Lieberman’s on 4th and Main Street in Robstown. There were many businesses in Robstown, including Leshins, Balzers, Anthony’s, Morris Variety, two pharmacies, and the South Texas Feed and Seed next to the Lumber Yard. Bill’s father sold lumber to help build the town’s community hall, complete with a wood floor;

Bill assisted in hauling lumber. The community hall is 4-5 miles down the county road on Mainer. It is not a part of the labor camp.

In terms of the relationship between Robstown residents and the labor camp residents, Bill “does not think it was controversial.” In the late 1950s, machines came in, including combines, etc. Bill recalls that “machines taking over was a gradual thing.” There were still a lot of small 160-acre farms back then. There are still hoe hands today, and you will see 8-10 people chopping. A mural at the post office in Robstown today [2013] depicts cotton picking.

Bill does not know why his father stopped in his position as manager of the Robstown Labor Camp. He does not remember his father ever having a cross word about Mr. Page. Willard Martin died when Bill was 30 years old (around 1975). He had a lumber yard. Bill recalls Willard muttering when times were slow that he “should have stayed in a government job.”